

An Exploratory Study of Fashion Blogs Using Nethnography

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ABSTRACT: *Since the world has been evolving from a producer-driven world into a consumer-driven world, consumer research is a critical issue in product development and marketing. It is difficult to identify, create, or educate a group of consumers. Since consumers have a tendency of self-affirmation, even though they may be attracted to a variety of topics aroused around them, it does not mean they are paying attention. Therefore, consumer research based on traditional fashion media has been challenged. The aim of this paper is to identify consumers' interests in fashion-related topics, and to understand consumers' needs and to provide less-biased information to the fashion industry by examining corporate fashion blogs. It was found that identifying potential customers through background research and studying what they want is critical. In other words, instead of selling people what they want to sell; asking consumers what they want to buy is a much wiser idea.*

KEYWORDS: *consumer research; nethnography; blogs;*

I. INTRODUCTION

Few would disagree that we are moving forward to a digital world, where people are exposed to more diversified sources of digital information but have even stronger desires to show personal opinions. More and more Americans are reading news and looking for information online [1]. Blogs including Video Blogs (V-logs), where not only bloggers could regularly publish their thoughts on a particular subject, but also individual viewers could share their opinions, is an excellent example of this trend. It firstly came out in the mid-1990s, attracted about 2 million users in 2006, 184 million blogs and 346 million readers in 2008 and skyrocketed to tens of millions of users in existence worldwide now [2]. In addition, video blogs as an updated form of blogs has been booming.

In this internet-connected world, fashion emerges and fads even quicker. Following the launch in 2003 of the first fashion blog – nogoodforme – fashion blog has asserted itself as a key space for the production and the circulation of fashion discourse [3]. Traditional fashion media has been challenged while interactions between fashion “insider” and “outsiders” are greatly encouraged in contemporary world. According to a 2006 survey of over 56,000 readers/participants of blogs, blog audiences could be divided into four categories, namely, readers of political, gossip, mom and music blogs. Among them, fashion blog fits into the gossip segment of blogs. It was found different segments of blog readers have distinct characteristics [4]. According to Click News [5], 77 % of gossip blog readers are women and over 49 % are in the age range of 22-30. More than 60% of them have a college degree and over 22% are students. This group consists frequent users of internet and influential readers of blogging. On average, they read three blogs daily [5]. In addition, they have great interest in fashion and have strong purchasing desires and spending power.

Rocamora [3] divided fashion blogs into two groups: independent blogs and corporate blogs. The former include a broad range of genres and are usually run by one individual only, while corporate blogs function as a voice of a fashion institution, such as a magazine/newspaper, a brand and a store. Although a blog for practical purposes generally looks inward – sharing the author's thoughts, experiences, and opinions [6] and fashion blogs encompass a wide variety of sites, the two groups are different in multiple aspects. First of all, bloggers of these two types of blogs have different purposes of writing and targeted readers; therefore, they are interested in sharing different contents and expressing different levels of personal opinions. According to Pew Research [1], most bloggers are primarily interested in creative, personal expression – documenting individual experiences, sharing practical knowledge, or just keeping in touch with friends and family [7]. However, it is different for corporate bloggers who are invited by online publishers to share their views. With a certain level of freedom, corporate bloggers have to match their work with publishers' expectations as well as that of targeted readers. In other words, less strong personal opinions could be observed.

Secondly, even though both of them allow and even expect interactions between bloggers and readers, it varies to different extents and in different ways. For personalized fashion bloggers, at least based on the researchers' own experience, it is more about showing identity and attracting people within a certain group. It is a "YES or NO" question. The bond between a reader and a blogger is either bonded tighter and tighter by time or never established. On the other hand, for corporate fashion writers, their work is more about sharing information and triggering thoughts and reactions. This is especially true for bloggers invited by public media such as magazines and newspapers. Abundant of research have been conducted to study fashion blogs with diversified emphasizes, however, the majority of them were focusing on personalized blogs [1,4,8]. It is generally recognized that now consumers are gaining powers or even dictating fashion trends [8,9] and people is taking the influence of celebrities, designers and fashion editors' opinions less seriously than before. Therefore, researchers in both academia and industry are making great efforts on investigating online fashion-related discussion to study consumers' needs for insights. However, little of this kind of research has been conducted based on corporate blogs.

One possible reason for lacking of literature in this domain could be pulled from psychological theories. New technologies such as the Internet could dramatically reduce the cost of acquiring information from a wide range of sources, however, once people have already established their own beliefs they would limit themselves to those that are likely to confirm their beliefs [10]. Even though guaranteeing exposure to information from diverse viewpoints has been a central goal of media policy in the United States and around the world [7], when it comes to personalized blogs it is undeniable that readers or potential customers would stick to blogs matching their beliefs/tastes. This is also a weakness of previous research. A comprehensive examination of corporate fashion blogs is thus necessary. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to identify consumers' interests in fashion-related topics, to understand consumers' needs and to provide less-biased information to producers by examining corporate fashion blogs.

Research questions: Different from the work of Thomas et al. [8], which was focusing on personalized blogs that written by primary consumers, the researcher is focusing on corporate blogs where topics are raised by bloggers invited by public online publishers. However, the questions being asked are similar: who are the readers and commentators of a particular corporate blog? What are readers saying about fashion within that community? What kinds of insights can marketers draw from the categories of fashion-related information being presented in corporate blogs? To be more specific, questions asked here include: What kind of fashion related topics could trigger more comments? What do readers want to read and to say? Who tends to respond? What are their opinions? Why do they respond in a particular way? What could fashion companies learn from consumers' worlds and reactions? Another sort of questions the researcher wants to study is whether the ideology held by an online publisher could have influence over contents posted by corporate bloggers and whether this influences readers' reactions or not? Would readers respond in different ways? If so, how and to what extent? What kind of insights could be explored?

II. METHODOLOGY

Entrée : As a study of nethnography, the selection process of online communities was critical yet challenging and time consuming. The entrée for this study must, first of all, be an online corporate fashion blog; second, have exposure to both fashion followers and general readers; last but not least, includes a certain amount of interactions among readers. Based on research questions and in order to decrease personal bias and to observe how general people respond to fashion related topics that are mainly initiated by fashion insiders such as fashion designers, stylists, fashion critics, editors and celebrities, only online publishers who have large-scale regular readers were taken into consideration. However, this filtering rule also brought in difficulties. Since the researcher is not targeting at fashion-oriented publishers, blog readers' responses could be non-relevant to initial fashion topic. Besides, it was very difficult for the researcher to find an online fashion community with a reasonable amount but also informative information such as comments. Nevertheless the researcher finally chose two online communities: *On the Runway* by New York Times (NYT) and *Speakeasy* by Wall Street Journal (WSJ), both of which have potential in answering the above-mentioned research questions as they both contain fashion related topics and constantly receive a certain amount of comments from viewers. Besides, many of those comments are informative and thoughts triggering. On the other hand, these two publishers are different in political and cultural ideology, which provides a chance to examine secondary questions. Therefore, finally they are chosen to complete this nethnography study. They were examined individually first to answer the first set of research questions and then compared with each other to studying the second type of questions.

On the Runway : On the Runway by New York Times provides fashion-related news and commentary, from the latest runway shows and street trends to an inside look into the design process. Almost every a few days (1 to 3 days), there is a new post. During fashion weeks, there were on average 4-5 posts every day. Topics may vary but always closely related to what were happening in the fashion world and the researcher noticed that there is an emphasis on the saying of the top of the fashion chain (designers/media).

Speakeasy-style: Speakeasy is an online column by WSJ covering media, entertainment, celebrity and the arts. Sub-column Style is its fashion and style section. On average, there is 1-2 posts every week. The frequency was almost the same during fashion weeks and there was no special report on fashion weeks. Almost every post receives many Facebook recommends and tweets, but not many comments directly replied to the post.

Data collection: Once the two entrées were determined, the researchers started to collect data in 2013. Posts appeared between Jan 1st and Feb 15th and associated responds such as comments, Facebook recommendations (Like) as well as Tweets (only Speakeasy-style, WSJ) were collected. This period was chosen because it was at the same time as Paris Fashion Weeks. It is of interest to investigate whether the fashion weeks could affect responding patterns.

These two blogs were visited every Friday morning from Feb 1st to April 15th. The researcher had to wait for at least three weeks before counting viewers' comments and other relevant information. This was because, usually, for every post the very last comment is received within 21 days. The researcher also revisited every post on April 15th to ensure there was no missing information. Following this procedure, during this 45 day period, it was identified that totally 75 posts were posted on On the Runway, while 26 were shown on Speakeasy-style. However, among the 75 On the Runway posts, 77.3% (58 posts) received at least one comment. In contrast, 53% (14 posts) of Speakeasy-style post received comments. After excluding posts received no comment, data collection followed a three-step strategy: First of all, each post and its comments were read and backed up for future reference. Secondly, readers' responses, not only the contents of each comment but also responding time, was entered into an Excel file. Other than that, the number of Facebook recommends for each post in both of the two entrées as well as the number of tweets in each Speakeasy-style post (no information of tweet was available on On the Runway) were also recorded. Later on, following the same logic as Thomas et al.'s work [8], topics of posts were further divided into ten categories: 1- personal style; 2- Brands and designers; 3- Tips and advice; 4- Retailers; 5-Trends; 6- Purchases; 7- Self-promotion; 8- Prices; 9- Other fashion topics (celebrity style, regional style, Technology, etc.); 10- Unrelated topics (law suit; family; business, etc.). Besides, viewers' responses were also coded into three groups: 0-negative (commenters' points of view were contradictory to that of bloggers); 1- neutral or non-relevant (no strong opinion or just commenting on something else rather than the topic of the post itself); and 2-positive (commenters agree with bloggers).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While 342 comments and 1028 Facebook Recommends were collected in On the Runway, only 36 comments and 849 recommends were collected from Speakeasy-style. This sharp contrast on total amount of posts collected from the two entrées was also reflected on the average amount of comments collected. On average, six comments and eighteen recommends per post were received in On the Runway, while 2.6 comments and 60.6 recommends per post were received in Speakeasy-style. In addition, totally 254 (with an average of 18.1 per post) tweets were collected from Speakeasy-style. On the other hand, average responding time is 2.1 days for On the Runway and 1.7 days for Speakeasy-style, with the longest responding time 60 days and 21 day respectively. After recording that above-mentioned information into the Excel file, data was organized and coded for analysis. No personal information of viewers and commenters could be identified in these two blogs thereafter.

Table 1 Commenters' attitudes toward bloggers' view

Attitudes toward posts	Negative	Neutral	Positive
On the Runway (342)	34.2% (117)	16.1% (55)	49.7% (170)
Speakeasy-style (36)	50% (18)	13.9% (5)	36.1% (13)

Other than that, even though viewers of both of the two blogs were interested mostly in brands and designers relevant topics, they did show differences in preference. About 43% of Speakeasy-style's posts were about personal style and dress advices, while there was no similar information provided in On the Runway. Instead, there were much more information about latest fashion trends and news from fashion industry (20% in total).

This part of contents was missing in Speakeasy-style. In addition, neither blogs have mentioned about Retail, Purchases, Self-Promotion, or Prices. More detailed information is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Frequency of blog topics

Category	1- Personal style	2- Brands and designers	3- Tips and advice	5- Trends	9- Other fashion topics	10- Unrelated topics
On the Runway (58)	0%	74.1% (43)	0%	6.9% (4)	12% (7)	6.9% (4)
Speakeasy-style (14)	14.3% (2)	35.8% (5)	28.6% (4)	0%	21.4% (3)	0%

In the case of On the Runway, the post received the most attention and triggered the most responses was posted on Jan 21st. It discussed about the first lady's morning outfit on the inauguration day. This post triggered 82 comments and received 755 Facebook recommends. Attitudes held by commenters were very different and made the commenting boards like a battle field. The one received the second highest attention was about designer John Galliano and his work with Oscar de la renta. It received 26 comments and 56 recommends. Besides, it seems like audience have great interested in seeing and judging the look of politician or people who are closes to politicians. A post discussed Jill Biden and her outfit had the third largest amount of comments (17) and recommends (52).

This pattern did not show on Speakeasy-style. Blogs talking about celebrity style did received the most comments comparing to other blogs, however they triggered a limited number of recommends in Speakeasy-style. There were two articles discussing about Mrs. Obama's outlook on Speakeasy-style. The first one taking about her new hairstyle received the highest number of comments (11), however, it got only an average number of recommends. What's more interesting was that the other article talking about her outfit, received the second highest number of comments (6) but only received the second lowest recommends comparing to other posts. The same thing happens to the cases of other celebrities. With closer scrutiny, the researcher found that instead of paying attention to what happens in the fashion world and judging other people's look, fans of Speakeasy-style were much more interested in spreading articles helping people dress appropriately. This could be easily observed in collected data, where posts received the most recommends were those discussing dress codes in different situations.

The most obvious thing could be learned from this study is that blog readers are very selective. Different people do pay attention to different things. Besides, they respond in very different ways. Generally, the researcher believes this interesting phenomenon presents evidence for self-affirmation. First of all, even though clothing is a need for everyone, regardless of their political and cultural preference, personal experience and preference do bring in bias and this unavoidably has effects on fashion choices. According to statistic data, the New York Times is considered to be a liberal newspaper. Only 33% of the Times readers are conservative, while 68% of the readers of The Wall Street Journal are conservative [1]. This demographic character also reflected on their responses to fashion blogs. Fans of NYT's On the Runway are much less defensive than those of Speakeasy-style. They are more willing to express positive opinions and supports for bloggers rather than critics. Besides, they are more open-eyed in the way that they are more interested in exploring fashion world rather than focusing on their own appearance. In contrast, information posted on Speakeasy-style is more conservative [1] but that is also why it attracts its own followers.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research did confirm that consumer research is the most important issue need to be addressed in marketing though there is not that much information could be directly applied to the fashion industry, which is contradictory to the researchers' expectation. Since the world has been evolving from a producer-driven world into a consumer-driven one, it is essential for fashion brands to understand that even though people may be attracted to topics aroused around them, it does not mean they are paying attention. Since people have a tendency of self-affirmation, it is very difficult to create or even educate a group of consumers. Therefore, identifying potential customers through background research and studying what they want is critical. In other words, instead of selling people what they want to sell; asking consumers what they want to buy is a much wiser idea.

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